

Parshat Bamidbar 5779

This d'var Torah seeks to reflect aspects of both the parasha and the forthcoming chag. Our parasha commences with a census count of B'nei Yisrael on the first of the second month i.e. Rosh Chodesh Iyar. Rashi tells us that *'Due to His love for them, He counts them on every occasion...When He was about to rest his Divine Presence on them, He counted them. On the first of Nisan the Tabernacle was erected, and on the first of Iyar He counted them.'*

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin in Ozna'im l'Torah queries this Rashi: Why did Hashem not count B'nei Yisrael on the first of Nisan— especially as that was the day on which He rested His Divine Presence on them? He explains that it Hashem intended to rest His Divine Presence permanently – rather than for the limited periods as had been the case in Mitzraim and at Har Sinai. The laws of mezuzah help to understand this: in Chutz La'Aretz, a house is considered to be one's permanent residence once one has lived there for at least thirty days. Similarly, Hashem first rested His Divine Presence upon the Tent of Meeting for one month, thereby establishing permanent residence among B'nei Yisrael; only once this period had concluded, did He command that they be counted – on the first of Iyar.

Flags and banners Chapter 2 introduces the degalim, the banners under which each tribe will camp. Verse two states that *'every man of the children of Israel shall encamp by his own standard, with the signs of their father's house: at some distance around the appointed tent shall they encamp.'* Rashi explains that *'each degel (flag) will have a coloured flag hanging from it, the colour of one shall not be the colour of another, the colour of each determined by the colour of its stone in the breastplate of the Kohen Gadol. Through this, each one will recognise his degel.'*

Shem MiShmuel explains that the function of a degel is to unify; so when the banner is raised each person knows when to assemble for a communal purpose. There is a further, spiritual, benefit of the degalim, since they also refer to attachment and the bond of love, indicating a constant, loving relationship with Hashem. Maintaining the camp-related theme, we can now look towards Shavuot and Kabbalat HaTorah, with B'nei Yisrael encamped at Har Sinai, preparing for matan Torah. The text in chapter 19 of sefer Shemot explains that before receiving the Torah it was necessary to follow two

procedures: *Hagbalah* – setting of boundaries around the people and guarding against ascending the mountain or touching its edges; and *Prishah* – to avoid marital relations for three days. Shem MiShmuel helps us to understand these rules by way of a parallel with limmud Torah. There are two aspects of limmud Torah: *Limmud* – the actual process of learning and assimilation of knowledge; and *Yediah* – possession and retention of the knowledge. Even if one forgets one's learning, he has still performed the mitzvah of limmud and will be rewarded accordingly as well as benefiting from the refinement of character that learning promotes. Conversely, if one could acquire a store of Torah knowledge without actually going through the limmud process, one has achieved yediah: perhaps similar to attainment without effort. Ultimately though, the purpose is to know Torah in order that it should accompany the Jew. Shem Mishmuel notes that since the source of Torah is divine, someone possessing it contains something divine within himself– akin to the soul reposing in the human body. Hence, while ideally Torah learning should encompass both the acts of limmud and yediah, each one of these has its own distinct and special merit.

Prishah and Hagbalah – analogous to Limmud Torah Shem MiShmuel suggests that prishah and hagbalah correspond to the 2 fundamental aspects of learning Torah. When B'nai Yisrael received the Torah, it was intended that they would gain a little of the divine, thus transforming their physical existence. However, in order to achieve this, total physical purity was required; in order that the body would be open to unite with Torah – hence the need to avoid physical relationships (*prishah*) allowing them to concentrate entirely on physical unity with Hashem and His Torah. As discussed above, a different sort of preparation was required for learning Torah itself – which Chazal describe as an *avodah*, or service to Hashem. In order to engage in correct Torah study achieve its aim of refining the character bringing him closer to Hashem, one must be in awe of the majesty and greatness of Hashem and His Torah. Now, in order for B'nei Yisrael to fully accept Torah and the requirement to make it the focus of learning and study, Hashem demanded that they step back from Har Sinai limiting their proximity to the revelation and instilling into them the appropriate fear of Heaven for productive Torah study. Hence the twin requirements of prishah and hagbalah enabled B'nei Yisrael to accept the Torah and helped prepare them for their role as the Talmidim and repositories of the Divine wisdom – from then and into the future.